
*The World Alliance of Reformed
Churches and the
Christian World Communions in
the context of the modern
ecumenical movement
(1948-1957)*

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A spectre is haunting the ecumenical movement - the spectre of confessionalism.

Why is John Mackay, the chairman of the International Missionary Council, so concerned with the rise of what he calls “ecumenical denominations” or “confessional blocks” – these same Christian World Communions often engaged in our days in a wide range of bilateral dialogues, some of them producing significant results? Because in the late 1940s the newly founded Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is sponsoring “confessional” mission work in the South and, by so doing, it might ultimately – at least in Mackay’s own view - be undermining the ecumenical movement.

We cannot prevent other churches from taking our witness to be the confession of a particular denomination, the expression of our own religious understanding. But woe to us, if we ourselves take such a view of it! (Wilhelm Niesel)

I. Tomorrow and Yesterday

How does the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) define itself as a world confessional family in the years following the foundation of the World Council of Churches? How does it envisage its relations with sister confessional organisations in the light of its own ecumenical self-understanding?

Exactly fifty years after the adoption of the statement “The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Movement”¹, WARC gathers in Accra, Ghana, August 2004, to review its ecumenical engagement at the international level in the light of its permanent constitutional purposes, in service to the ecumenical experiences and needs of its member churches and in response to an ecumenical landscape in which time and unity, particularly through conciliarity, no longer seem to converge.

Soon after Accra, the Alliance, other Christian World Communions (CWCs), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and several other ecumenical actors, are embarking on an urgent discussion on the institutional coherence of organised ecumenism and the need for its reconfiguration in times of growing limited resources and of major socio-historical transformations affecting Christianity in general and mainline or historical Protestant churches in particular.

Because these two events engage the WARC ecumenical self-understanding, as well as its views on the ecumenical movement and the role Christian World Communions might play within it, I thought it appropriate to resist both to ecumenical amnesia and to the temptation of believing that the world of the living is governed by the dead to an extent our vain philosophy is not prepared to admit and

¹ “The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Movement”. *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order Held at Princeton, N. J., U.S.A. 1954*, Geneva, Office of the Alliance, 1954, p. 73-79.

briefly revisit eight or nine years in which the Alliance lays some of the references for its future ecumenical engagement.

II. Geneva 1948: John Mackay against “confessional blocks”

The World Alliance holds its 1948 General Council in Geneva, Switzerland, August 11 to 17, a couple of days before the World Council of Churches meets for its first assembly in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

WARC issues a statement in which it welcomes “as a manifestation of the spirit and will of Jesus Christ, the sole King and Head of the Church” the formation of the World Council of Churches and recommends to Reformed churches in general “that they give serious and prayerful consideration to applying for membership in the World Council...”². More than that, the General Council agenda includes two addresses on “the present ecumenical situation”. One of them is by J.H. Cockburn, a staff of the WCC then still “in process of formation”.

The other one is given by a certain John Mackay. The name imposes a reverent note. If you intend to pursue the reading of this text, you better learn something about him. The Scottish missionary (1889-1983), who had worked for twenty years in Latin America (1916-1936), is now professor of ecumenics and President of Princeton Theological Seminary (USA). He will be elected President of the World Alliance in 1954. What is even more important for the purpose of this essay is that Mackay is also the chairman of the International Missionary Council (IMC), the major institutional expression of the mission wing of the ecumenical movement which will join the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1961.

² *Proceedings of the Sixteenth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System Held in Geneva, Switzerland 1948*. Edinburgh, Office of the Alliance, 1949, p. 201-210.

According to Mackay, the church has become, for the first time in history, “*ecumenical* in a geographical sense”³. Within the non-Roman Christianity, this “ecumenical” movement is marked by two different trends. One, centripetal, is “a trend towards greater understanding, unity and co-operation among non-Roman Catholic churches”. The other is described in the following terms: “certain Protestant denominations constitute what might be termed ecumenical denominations or confessional blocks. There is thus emerging world Lutheranism, world Anglicanism, world Methodism, etc.” What should then be the Reformed attitude “on an issue of this kind”⁴?

Mackay goes on to spell out “the actual relations of the Reformed churches to the ecumenical movement”. While some of them take no part in the general ecumenical movement, Reformed churches in general “have ordinarily been very co-operative in their relations with other churches”. They have played “a leading part in determining the thought and in shaping the policy of the contemporary ecumenical movement”⁵.

He then concludes his address by listing elements in the Reformed tradition “which have a bearing on the attitude which the Reformed Churches should adopt towards the ecumenical movement”. John Calvin was in his thoughts and attitudes “the most ecumenical figure of his time”. His ecclesiology as well as the Reformed doctrine of the communion of saints “produce naturally a spirit of friendly relationship towards all Christian churches...”. When true to itself, Presbyterianism “is naturally ecumenical”. Reformed churches need to work out a Reformed doctrine of the church. In each country, they should do all in their power “to achieve unity, and if possible, organic union, between all the members of the Reformed family within that country, giving to the consummation of organic union between Reformed

³ J. Mackay, “The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Situation”. *Proceedings of the Sixteenth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System Held at Geneva, Switzerland 1948*, Edinburgh, Office of the Alliance, 1949, p. 110.

⁴ J. Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

⁵ J. Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 110-111.

churches priority (...) over union with churches belonging to a different ecclesiastical tradition”⁶.

Why is the chairman of the International Missionary Council so concerned with the rise of what he calls “ecumenical denominations” or “confessional blocks” – these same Christian World Communions often engaged in 2004 in a wide range of bilateral dialogues, some of them producing significant results?⁷ Because in the late 1940s the newly founded Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is sponsoring “confessional” mission work in the South and, by so doing, it might ultimately – at least in Mackay’s own view - be undermining the ecumenical movement. Let us go back to the documents.

III. Cambridge 1949: Christian World Communions as a risk to the ecumenical movement

The WARC Executive Committee meets in Cambridge in 1949. The agenda includes two items on the “problems of the missionary movement and of the younger churches as related to the Alliance”. Chairman Mackay, just back from the joint meeting between the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council, introduces the issue.

Mackay stresses the importance for the Alliance “to keep in close touch with the Missionary movement”. He is “strongly of the opinion” that the Alliance “should not imitate the Lutherans and promote Missions as an Alliance”. If this really happens, “it will give a new

⁶ J. Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 111-112.

⁷ Some essays which deal with the origins of the conference of leaders of Christian World Communions seem to overlook this point. See for instance: Harold E. Fey, “Confessional Families and the Ecumenical Movement”, in H.E. Fey (ed.), *The Ecumenical Advance – A History of the Ecumenical Movement – Volume 2 1948-1968*, Geneva, WCC, p. 121; E. Perret, “The Conference of Secretaries of World Confessional Families: 1957-1977”, in Y. Ishida *et alii*, *The History and Theological Concerns of World Confessional Families*, Stuttgart, Kreuz Verlag-LWF, 1979, p. 43-72; L. Vischer, “World Communions, the WCC and the Ecumenical Movement”. *The Ecumenical Review*, 54(1), January-April 2002, p. 142-161.

character to international denominationalism". Presbyterianism should pursue "an ecumenical policy, true to the spirit of Calvin" and encourage younger churches "to take the lead in the formation of United Churches". If a certain trend in the confessional missionary movement develops, he concludes, "it will break the ecumenical movement"; it will tend "to crystallize for the future the ecclesiastical traditions of the past. That would be a tragedy"⁸.

The 1949 Executive Committee not only re-states the attitude of the Alliance to the ecumenical movement by affirming that "while we want to be true to our Reformed and Presbyterian convictions, we are glad to be in the larger body of the World Council of Churches. We want to take our full share in the building of the 'Una Sancta'"⁹. It also agrees on three points concerning "the Alliance and the other Confessional groups": we are not ready "to follow other confessional groups in what we believe to be narrow and dangerous confessionalism"; in foreign mission fields, "we work for union with other Protestant forces"; we are ready "to exchange information with other confessional groups and work together whenever possible"¹⁰.

If Mackay and the World Alliance saw no significant difference between the emergence of the "confessional blocks" (what we call today Christian World Communions, CWCs) and the ecumenical movement, their analysis would have been a non-analysis and Mackay's question on the Reformed attitude "on an issue of this kind" would have been a non-question.

But they do see significant differences between the confessional and the ecumenical movements. They seem to transfer to all "confessional blocks" the potential risk for the ecumenical movement they discern in one of them: the Lutheran World Federation.

⁸ Alliance of Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System, *Minutes of the Executive Committee held at Westminster College, Cambridge, England, July 4th to 6th 1949*, p. 10-11.

⁹ *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System held in Cambridge, Great Britain, July 4-6 1949*, p. 10.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

In the diagnosis of this potential risk, issues apparently related to the so called “orphaned missions” – amplified by the decision of the Lutheran churches in India to remain outside the formation of the Church of South India and by the decision of Lutheran churches in Germany to create their own structure alongside the Evangelical Church (EKD) – were given more importance than several resolutions, adopted by the 1947 first LWF Assembly, indicating that “all Lutheran churches were being urged to cooperate in mission efforts, not only among themselves but also with the International Missionary Council” and that “a serious attitude toward the latter agency was seen as an integral part of a common Lutheran ecumenical obligation”¹¹.

More than that, the question Mackay raises in the Geneva General Council about the Reformed attitude on the emergence of the “confessional blocks”, his 1949 critical remarks about the LWF and the Alliance’s own rejection of a “narrow and dangerous confessionalism” suggest that in this regard the World Alliance is not or should not be seen or see itself as one of them.

The unity required by mission in the global south encourages Presbyterians and Reformed to conceive of a fellowship of churches whose specificity is not exclusive and whose destiny is to be made redundant by what is experienced as a growing convergence between time and unity.

This divergence (or, if your prefer, this lack of full common understanding...) between two Protestant world communions already housed in the Geneva headquarters of the WCC plays an important part in two major ecumenical statements made by the Alliance in the early 1950s. I will review them briefly, one right now and the other in the next section of this text.

¹¹ J. H. Schjørring et al. (eds.), *From Federation to Communion – The History of the Lutheran World Federation*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997, p. 18.

IV. Basel 1951: A statement on the dangers of “ecumenical denominationalism”

The agenda of the 1951 Executive Committee meeting, held in Basel, Switzerland, includes a discussion on “the future activity of the Alliance”. It takes place on Monday evening, August 13. And the chairman is... John Mackay.

According to the minutes, the chairman pointed out that “we were living in an era of neo-confessionalism and that it was essential for us to define our attitude”. After a “good exchange of views”, it is felt desirable “to leave the problem of the future activity of the Alliance until after the adoption of the statement on the role Alliance in the present ecumenical situation”¹². The mentioned “statement” is adopted in the same meeting and submitted to member churches for study and comment. Here is its argument.

The life of Protestant Churches in the present time is marked by "three main trends of ecclesial character". The first is "a potent movement towards ecumenical understanding and unity". The second, in opposition to the World Council of Churches, is a movement towards "the world unity of sectarian groups". The third trend, "ecumenical denominationalism», represents "the desire on the part of each major Protestant communion to rediscover and purify its own religious heritage and to unite the Churches which belong to it in a denominational world fellowship". In view of this Church situation, it is important that the Alliance should "define its significance and objectives"¹³.

Based on the ecclesiological statements made by the Preamble of the 1875 Constitution on fellowship with

¹² *Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System – Missionshaus, Basle (Switzerland), August 13-15, 1951, p. 5.*

¹³ "The World Presbyterian Alliance in the Present Ecumenical Situation", *Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System – Missionshaus, Basle (Switzerland), August 13-15, 1951, p. 25.*

other Protestant Churches, the Executive Committee affirms that the Reformed tradition in post-Reformation Christianity is "by nature ecumenical": it is committed "to the pursuit of Christian unity upon the basis of loyal commitment to the essential verities of the Christian faith".

The Church is an instrument of God's glory. In the same way "it is the true nature of Presbyterianism "never to be merely an end in itself, but to serve the Church Universal of Jesus Christ, the Church which is His Body". The highest glory of the Reformed tradition is "to maintain the vision and viewpoint of the Church Universal, seeking continually its welfare and unity..."¹⁴

These considerations lead the Executive Committee to affirm the need "to increase solidarity among the members of the Reformed family" and to advocate "a strengthening of the Alliance of Reformed Churches...". The promotion of solidarity among Reformed Churches "would help to emphasize aspects of the Reformation heritage which are of permanent significance for the Christian Church and the secular order at the present time". Secondly, Presbyterian solidarity on a world scale would meet "the contemporary needs of many persons and Churches belonging to the Reformed tradition".

The younger Presbyterian Churches would then be led "to understand that it is the true glory of this tradition to seek and promote Christian solidarity and also church union where the local or national situation demands it". Finally, membership in the Alliance is important for those Reformed churches which are not part of the "ecumenical movement for Christian unity". It strengthens them "against schismatic elements in their own ranks" and prevents them "from giving their adhesion to any organisation designed to disrupt ecumenical unity and to thwart Presbyterian solidarity"¹⁵.

¹⁴ "The World Presbyterian Alliance in the Present Ecumenical Situation"..., *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁵ "The World Presbyterian Alliance in the Present Ecumenical Situation"..., *op. cit.*, p. 26-27.

The Executive Committee of the Alliance, concludes the statement, "is acutely aware" of the perils represented by "ecumenical denominationalism". The Alliance "would never desire to be a party to preventing the incorporation of one of its member churches into wider ecclesiastical relationships..." Presbyterianism, on the other hand, is called to see to it "that the resurgence of denominationalism, which is manifest around the globe, shall not become sectarian, but shall remain ecumenical in character".

According to the Alliance's Executive Committee, "if the great world denominations, the Reformed Churches among them, pursue denominational pre-eminence and make their great world bodies ends in themselves, they will betray Jesus Christ". Conversely, if they desire "to make denominational emphasis an enrichment of that common evangelical heritage, they will, by so doing fulfil the designs of the one Head of the Church and be true organs of the Holy Spirit"¹⁶.

Which are the language regularities transversal to these papers and statements? Christian mission is at stake. Christian unity and Reformed unity are requirements of Christian mission in the southern hemisphere. Which are in your view the essential affirmations made by this statement? Here is my attempt to summarise them.

1. Protestant Churches today are marked by three different ecumenical trends, namely, ecumenical unity, ecumenical sectarianism and ecumenical confessionalism.
2. The Reformed tradition being by nature related to ecumenical unity, the purpose of the Alliance is not to promote world Presbyterianism as an end.
3. The Alliance needs to be strengthened to promote solidarity among Reformed Churches by emphasising the ecumenical aspects of the Reformed tradition, particularly among the younger Churches, and by resisting to ecumenical sectarianism.
4. To pursue denominational pre-eminence and to make great world bodies ends in themselves is to betray Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ "The World Presbyterian Alliance in the Present Ecumenical Situation", *op. cit.*, p. 27.

IV. Princeton 1954:
Calvin's ecclesiology "enables the Reformed Churches
to stand at the centre of the ecumenical movement"

Like in Geneva 1948, The World Alliance holds its 1954 General Council in Princeton, USA, a couple of weeks before the World Council of Churches meets for its second Assembly in Evanston, USA. This promising practice of meeting as "Catholic Reformed", in the framework of a visible sign of the Church universal has ever since disappeared.

The 1954 General Council is very ecumenically oriented. My survey, *The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Modern Ecumenical Movement – A selected, Annotated, Chronological Bibliography*¹⁷, includes seven documents from Princeton 1954. No further WARC general council matches such score.

Joseph Hromadka, John Baillie, Henri D'Espine and chairman John Mackay are invited to speak on the Reformed churches and the ecumenical movement. W. A. Visser't Hooft and H. P. Van Dusen address the General Council on the World Council of Churches and the relation between the themes of the two assemblies. Space does not allow me to deal with all these contributions. I will simply review the General Council opening address before moving to the Alliance's 1954 statement on its role within the ecumenical movement.

In his opening address on the main theme of the Princeton General Council, John Mackay, *l'incontournable*, reflects first on the witness of the "Reformed heritage" then on the witness of the "Confessional Alliance"¹⁸. By the contemporary witness of the Reformed heritage, he

¹⁷ O.P. Mateus, *The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Modern Ecumenical Movement – A Selected, Annotated, Chronological Bibliography (1875-2004)*, due out in 2004.

¹⁸ John Mackay, "The Witness of the Reformed Churches in the World today", *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order Held at Princeton, N. J., U.S.A. 1954*, Geneva, Office of the Alliance, 1954, p. 109-120.

means as a matter of fact the significance for the ecumenical movement of some central aspects of the Reformed ethos.

Presbyterians, Mackay writes, share with all evangelical Christians the “four great foundations” of Christian religion, namely "the supreme authority of the Bible, Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, the reality of the new man in Christ, and the Christian Church as the community of Christ".

At the same time, they hold certain "specific emphases" that constitute their "particular contribution" to the Church Catholic. Mackay, like the Alliance itself will do in the future, does not speak here of the Reformed identity in terms of church polity, a *corpus* of Reformed confessions or of essential tenets of the Reformed tradition. He prefers the more modest, flexible, hermeneutical language of “specific emphases” that points not so much to doctrinal content and consequently to confessional borders as to a theological style.

Which are these “emphases” held by the Presbyterians by way of identity? The first one is "the sovereign rule of God in the affairs of men"¹⁹. Presbyterian truth "is organized around the concept of the divine sovereignty, God's eternal purpose in Christ which is history's central and controlling reality"²⁰. This emphasis involves, notes Mackay, "that men and nations owe their health and stability, and also their security, to the attitude which they take up towards God's eternal righteousness as set forth in Holy Scripture and in Jesus"²¹.

The second emphasis is "the instrumental role of the Christian and the Christian Church". God was supremely manifest within history "in the form of a Servant". The Christian and the Church belong to God, are the servants of God. They can never be an end in themselves. The Church is most truly the Church "when it is God's servant, the medium whereby He expresses His redemptive love to mankind...".

¹⁹ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

²⁰ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 111-112.

²¹ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

The formula "an end in themselves", that reminds the ecclesiology of Basel 1951, indicates that Mackay is just about to draw ecumenical implications from this brief description of the Reformed ethos or style.

This Reformed emphasis, he goes on to say, "needs to be blazoned forth in the present ecumenical situation". No Church "can ever be regarded as an end in itself or the master of its members"²². Like in Geneva 1948, Mackay discerns two basic trends in the ecumenical movement of his day. One is "towards world-wide unity among the Churches" and the other is "towards confessional unity"²³. There is no greater need than to think through "the problem of the new confessionalism in its relation to the ecumenical movement of our time"²⁴.

Against this background Mackay deals with the witness of the "confessional Alliance" by proposing five statements.

The first one is that "we are not, and we should never become, an ecclesiastical block"²⁵. The second, that "we are loyally committed to Christ's Church Universal"²⁶. While Christians are one in Christ and are called "to give the maximum visible expression to unity", structure "is not of the essence of the Church".

There are two things we Presbyterians must repudiate "with all our might": one is what has been called "ecclesiastical tribalism" and the other is "the idea of a super Church"²⁷. This means that "we do not regard the Roman ideal as the ideal for the Church of Jesus Christ"²⁸. We do not consider that "the ultimate historical form of Christian unity involves a 'single, unified Church structure, dominated by a centralized administrative authority'"²⁹.

²² John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

²³ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, 114.

²⁴ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

²⁵ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

²⁶ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

²⁷ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

²⁸ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

²⁹ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

The third statement Mackay proposes is that "we emphasize the place of the local in the sphere of the ecumenical"³⁰. The Presbyterian churches in the Hispanic world "can be brought into the fellowship of the wider ecumenical community only through a sense of belonging to a confessional family"³¹.

The fourth one is "to stress the importance of theology" and the fifth is to proclaim that "a Church is validated as a Church of God not by its organized structure, but by its missionary action"³². Structure is not an end in itself, "nor can it be made the supreme criterion of a true Church". The Church becomes the Church "not when it extols its virtues, but when it accepts its God-given mission"³³.

Let's now move to the second "major statement" on the ecumenical movement made by the Alliance in the 1950s. The Reformed family gathered in Princeton recognises first of all that Reformed churches throughout the world "have taken an active part" in the ecumenical movement. The 1954 General Council feels therefore the need to affirm "in ways that are relevant to the actual ecumenical situation" the task and contribution of Reformed churches to the search for Christian unity.

The ecumenical movement, says Princeton 1954, is "a singularly significant fact about the Christian Church in our time". This "deep stirring" toward the unity of the churches "is of God, not men, a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit"³⁴ in accordance "with the mind and will of Jesus Christ"³⁵. On which grounds does Princeton 1954 state such a recognition?

Jesus Christ transforms us and makes us fully human in and through our fellowship with one another. He breaks

³⁰ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

³¹ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

³² John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

³³ John Mackay, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

³⁴ "The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Movement". *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order Held at Princeton, N. J., U.S.A. 1954*, Geneva, Office of the Alliance, 1954, p. 73.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

down all barriers of separations. He reconciles and unites. Wherever and whenever his gathered believers preach and practice his gospel of reconciliation and communion and administer the sacraments according to his institution, there he is and *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*.

Unity is therefore “a gift to the Church in Jesus Christ her Lord”. Whenever the community of believers is divided by “the various forms of faith and life of the Church”, Christ himself “calls these churches to unity and wills to accomplish it in them through his Word and Spirit”. Unity is also a task: Christians are, therefore, “under a particular and pressing responsibility to give visible expression to the unity which the Lord of the Church will and works among them”³⁶.

Because they so believed, the Reformers “never intended to create a new Church”. They rather intended “to clarify and restore the faith and life of the Church in obedience to the word of God”³⁷. Calvin’s ecclesiology “enables the Reformed Churches to stand at the centre of the ecumenical movement”. He severely condemned those “who encourage schism from motives other than those which proceed from absolute obedience to the word of God”³⁸. It is therefore “urgently necessary” to resist “any increase of division in the Body of Christ and to labour to compose all differences of faith and order which are not justified by obedience to the word of God...”³⁹

Some kind of structure, says Princeton 1954, is necessary to the Church. However, “the visible structure of the Church is not identical with the unity of the Church”. The living adaptation of structures to Christ’s mission in the world and in the Church is an expression of “the living relation between Christ, the Head of the Church and the members of the Body”⁴⁰.

Our adherence to the Presbyterian Order “is inspired by the fact that it expresses certain fundamental aspects of

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

³⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

³⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 75.

³⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁴⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

the nature and life of the Church”. But we do not consider it to be “the one indispensable government structure of the Church”. Likewise, we cannot regard any particular existing form of episcopacy as a “fundamental condition of the restoration of the unity of the Church”⁴¹.

Princeton goes on to state that as Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, we thus “recognise the ministry, sacraments and membership of all churches, which, according to the Bible, confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour”.

Their members are all invited and gladly welcome “to the table of our common Lord”. The table is the Lord’s, say the statement, not ours. “We believe that we dare not refuse the sacrament to any baptized person who loves and confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour”. We cannot proclaim the gospel of reconciliation “without demonstrating at the Table of the Lord that we are reconciled to one another”. Therefore “we would welcome face to face talks with our fellow Christians in other churches, looking toward the time when all sincere Christians will be welcome around a common Table”⁴².

Finally, the statement notes that obedience to Christ involves not only unity but also mission. The oneness of believers in Christ, it says quoting a well-known 1951 WCC statement on the meaning of ecumenical, “is inseparable from dynamic and effective outreach of the Church into every part of the world and into every phase of the world’s life”⁴³.

What is then “the role of the Alliance in the present ecumenical situation”? A confessional alliance such ours “can and must provide the opportunity and the means for furthering the ecumenical reality of the Church”⁴⁴; it can “give strength and living reality to every effort to express the mission and unity of the universal Church”⁴⁵.

⁴¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁴² *Op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁴⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁴⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

The Alliance, the statement goes on, "is only an instrument in the service of more ultimate purposes" as much as it is the nature of Presbyterianism "never to be an end in itself".

The Alliance desires, therefore "to collaborate closely with the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council as the main organisational expressions of that movement"⁴⁶. Thanks to the WCC basis, the way is open to all Alliance member churches to join the Council. Churches which are the fruit of the missionary work "should be free to enter into local or regional union with other Christian bodies if, in this way, they can bear a better witness to Christ"⁴⁷.

However, at least three reasons call "for a strong and active Presbyterian and Reformed confessional agency". The first is the need for "bearing witness to the basic doctrinal position of the Reformed Churches". In the framework of ecumenical conversations, "the task of the Alliance is steadily to exhort the Reformed Churches to have recourse to the Holy Scriptures as the only rule of faith and practice"⁴⁸. There are aspects in which the aid of a confessional organisation to the exercise by the churches of their ecumenical doctrinal responsibility "may play an important role in the contemporary ecumenical situation"⁴⁹.

The second reason is the need for emphasising "the fundamentals of our Presbyterian polity". The Alliance can serve as an instrument "by promoting our joint study of polity, by bringing us to greater unity in our convictions regarding it, and by gaining for these convictions a hearing in ecumenical circles which no single Church could command"⁵⁰.

The third reason is the need for "rendering certain practical services to members of the Presbyterian and Reformed family", including "the initiation of studies of

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁴⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁴⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 78-79.

union or reunions (...) of the constituent churches of the Alliance with each other or with other churches”⁵¹.

In the years following the foundation of the World Council of Churches, the Alliance – then a fellowship of churches with the ecclesial profile of a “Christian World Communion” – formulates its ecumenical self-understanding in terms of a bridge which, through ecumenical Reformed theology, intends to link isolated Reformed denominations to their own family as well as to the other Christian churches preferably through organic union; it understands itself as existing provisionally, in between times: between Reformed isolation today and the visible unity of the Church universal tomorrow. This unusual instrumental-provisional self-understanding governs the merger between the Presbyterian Alliance and the Congregational Council accomplished in 1970. Before that it inspires the creation of a conference of leaders of Christian World Communions.

V. A Conference of Heads of Christian World Communions... against the new global confessionalism

After the 1954 General Council, Chairman Mackay, now WARC President, seems more convinced than in previous years that the new configuration of the ecumenical movement he has been tirelessly describing and tirelessly combating at least since Geneva 1948 is not likely to undergo major changes in the near future.

The Alliance has already clearly stated its views on the so called new global confessionalism and the ecumenical movement. It is time now for the Alliance to move into action and respond through new initiatives to the new ecumenical scene. Action takes two courses.

The first one has to do with WARC itself. Addressing the 1955 Executive Committee, meeting near Geneva,

⁵¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 79.

Mackay draws the attention to the “dynamic growth of the Lutheran World Federation”. This is due, he continues, “to a vital sense of confessional position”. The time has come for the Alliance “to enter into the confessional discourse now going on within the ecumenical movement”⁵².

Which roles should it play? First of all, “to help and to relate together all the members of our confessional family, especially the struggling members of our family, and those churches not within the ecumenical movement”; then “to offset any tendency within the W.C.C. for it to become a vast monolithic structure” and, finally, “to strengthen the ecumenical movement by keeping before our sister churches in the W.C.C. certain basic principles entrusted to our tradition”, namely the kingship of Christ, the priesthood of all believers and our conception of the Church as “a servant of the redemptive plan of Jesus Christ and not as an end within itself”. While the Anglican-Catholic tradition is contributing the emphasis on liturgy, and the Lutheran World Federation is contributing “the concept of Church service”, our confessional family should perhaps contribute “a substantial body of Protestant theology for this century”⁵³.

What does it mean in terms of programmes? In a 1956 paper, to which I will come back, Mackay makes five proposals⁵⁴. I will mention four and hold the fifth until the next page. The first is “the complete restoration of the Calvin Auditorium in Geneva”. Sounds strange to you? For Mackay the Auditorium “will be the symbol of a Christian heritage of thought and life which when true to itself seeks the glory of God above every other interest or concern”. The second is to hold the next general council in Brazil, to give expression “to the reality of our missionary interest and our far-flung confessional family”. The third is “to make provision for intensive

⁵² *World Alliance of Reformed Churches – Executive Committee Meeting, July 18-21, 1955*, p. 4.

⁵³ *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁵⁴ J. Mackay. “The Confessional Resurgence and the Ecumenical Movement with Special Reference to the Role and Development of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches”. *Minutes of the Executive Committee, Prague, Czechoslovakia, August 7-11, 1956*, Appendix IX, p. 35-40.

theological research in our Reformed heritage of faith” and the fourth to ensure “that all sister Churches belonging to the Reformed family of Churches who may have suffered in recent times receive adequate support”⁵⁵.

The second course of action has to do with inter-confessional initiatives to resist to “confessionalism” on behalf of the ecumenical movement as it expresses itself in the World Council of Churches. Since the 1954 Assembly in Evanston, the WCC Commission on Faith and Order has been facilitating informal conversations between the Alliance and the Lutheran World Federation. The Alliance wants to take a step forward and to launch the proposal of a new ecumenical space to overcome what it sees as a potential conflict between the confessional and the ecumenical. Let us listen to Mackay for the last time in this text.

In the last thirty years, he writes in 1956 in a paper I’ve just quoted, “three significant developments have taken place in non-Roman Christianity”: a reborn sense of the church, the emergence of the ecumenical movement and the resurgence of confessionalism. What does he mean by “confessionalism” or neo-confessionalism in 1956?

The reborn sense of the church and the new aspiration towards church unity have awakened in the several confessional groups which make up the Protestant family “a fresh interest in their religious heritage”⁵⁶. It is being realised that a Christian “cannot belong to the Church in general”. A Christian becomes introduced into the fullness of Christ “through a specific Church tradition”. She or he treats this tradition, however, “not as an idolatrous expression of the one and holy Church, but as a providential instrument through which he was introduced to the Christian faith and nourished in the Christian life.

The new confessionalism is different from the old: there is no disposition on the part of the Anglicans, Congregationalists, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists or Presbyterians “to absolutize their several confessional

⁵⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁵⁶ *Op. Cit.*, p. 36.

structures or loyalties”. Each believes it enshrines in its heritage “something that is authentically Christian” and this something makes “its specific contribution to the ecumenical treasure house of Christian faith and life”⁵⁷.

However, the ecumenical movement and the confessional movement “are developing side by side”. The future relationship of these two movements is for Mackay “one of the most crucial questions confronting Protestant Christianity in our time”. For the plain truth is that “the confessional movement could develop in such a way as to wreck the ecumenical movement” or at least “reduce the World Council of Churches to a venerated ecclesiastical façade”. It could “prevent unions taking place between the ‘Younger Churches’ and for that matter between ‘Older Churches’ in new situations”. On the other hand, “the Confessional Movement, if wisely directed, can and should enrich the ecumenical movement”. But if this is going to happen “the Confessional movement must be taken seriously by the World Council of Churches”⁵⁸.

What is the role of the Alliance in this dual context of the ecumenical and the confessional? The Alliance was “the first confessional body to become organized on a world scale” as well as the first “to interpret its position and outlook in the present ecumenical situation”. It does not regard itself “as existing to promote World Presbyterianism but rather to strengthen the Holy Catholic Church through the Presbyterian witness”. “Open communion” is regarded by the Alliance “as the threshold and not as the consummation of Christian unity”. The Church Universal in our time “needs the witness of our Reformed heritage of faith”. In this connection, he writes, “it is important that we call upon ourselves, and upon our brethren of the other Confessional groups, to engage in an act of self-examination, re-appraisal and re-dedication” so that “the confessions bring their pure gold into the ecumenical treasure house of faith”⁵⁹.

⁵⁷ *Op. Cit.*, p. 37.

⁵⁸ *Op. Cit.*, p. 37.

⁵⁹ *Op. Cit.*, p. 38.

And here I come, finally, to the fifth proposal of action made by Mackay: “let us make arrangements for an informal meeting to take place between leaders of the several confessional organisations”⁶⁰. At the present moment, “there is no way of knowing what the aims are, objectives and trends of the Confessional Movement as a whole”. This can only be done “if Confessional leaders come together for the exchange of information and the discussion of policies in an atmosphere of Christian confidence”⁶¹.

WARC adopts this proposal in the same year. A first informal meeting takes place in New Haven, USA, 1957, in the framework of a WCC Central Committee. The following year, WARC proposes the following points as the agenda for the first official meeting: the place of confessionalism in the ecumenical movement; the ecumenical contribution of resurgent confessionalism; confessionalism as a threat to oneness in Christ; ecumenical commitment and confessional mission⁶².

Since 1957, writes Harold Fey a few years later, “the officers [Fey means presidents and secretaries] of fourteen world confessional families have met in Geneva, generally annually, for conversations among themselves and with members of the staff of the World Council of Churches”⁶³.

VI. Tomorrow through yesterday?

A spectre is haunting the ecumenical movement. The spectre of confessionalism. The 1948 perception of this potential ecumenical risk – whichever views we might hold about it today – plays an important part as the Alliance formulates its ecumenical self-understanding in the following years and at the same time takes the

⁶⁰ *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.

⁶¹ *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.

⁶² *Minutes of the Executive Committee, Stony Point, New York, U.S.A., August 8-13, 1957*, p. 20.

⁶³ Harold E. Fey, “Confessional Families and the Ecumenical Movement”, in H.E. Fey (ed.), *The Ecumenical Advance – A History of the Ecumenical Movement – Volume 2 1948-1968*, Geneva, WCC, p. 121.

initiative leading to the creation of a conference of leaders of Christian World Communions.

The Alliance does not pay a lip service to the ecumenical self-understanding that emerges from the past pages. According to its 1954 constitution, “United churches which have retained in their faith, life and government a sufficient and substantial part of the Reformed heritage (...) may likewise be eligible for admission”; one of the permanent purposes of the Alliance is now to study “what unions or reunions of the constituent Churches of the Alliance, with each other or with other churches, appear to be according to the will of God”⁶⁴.

After the already mentioned 1970 merger between the Alliance and the International Congregational Council – the only case (but hopefully not the last one) of organic union among Christian World Communions –, the new constitution not only drops the 1954 reference to promoting Presbyterian polity as one of the constitutional aims, but it also formulates the purposes of the new fellowship clearly in the language of a “Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology”⁶⁵.

One of these purposes is to facilitate “the contribution to the ecumenical movement of the experiences and insights which churches within the Alliance have been giving in their history, and to share with churches of other traditions within that movement, and particularly in the World Council of Churches, in the discovery of forms of church life and practice which will enable the people of God more fully to understand and express together God’s will for his people”⁶⁶.

It is because the Alliance understands itself, in the light of a “Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic theology”, as a provisional instrument placed between the isolation of

⁶⁴ Constitution of the Alliance as adopted by the 17th General Council, 1954, article III.8, *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order Held at Princeton, N. J., U.S.A. 1954*, Geneva, Office of the Alliance, 1954, p. 56.

⁶⁵ Cf. Alan P.F. Sell, *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology – The contribution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1875 – 1982*, Eugene (USA), Wipf & Stock, 1998, 304 p.

⁶⁶ Constitution, article III.9, www.warc.ch/who/const.html

Reformed churches today and the visible unity of the Church Universal tomorrow that it seeks, on the one hand, to resist to confessional mission in the South in the late 1940s and, on the other hand, to build a bridge in the late 1950s between its sister Christian world communions and the ecumenical movement as it is represented by the World Council of Churches.

We cannot prevent other Churches from taking our witness to be the confession of a particular denomination, future WARC president Wilhelm Niesel writes in 1954, “but woe to us, if we ourselves take such a view of it”⁶⁷.

⁶⁷ W. Niesel, “The Reformed Witness and the Word of God”, *Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order Held at Princeton, N. J., U.S.A. 1954*, Geneva, Office of the Alliance, 1954, p. 127.